DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 425 039 RC 021 738

AUTHOR	Fitchen, Janet M.
TITLE	"The Single-Parent Family" and Welfare Reform: Is Marriage the Solution?
INSTITUTION	Cornell Univ., Ithaca, NY. Community and Rural Development Inst.
PUB DATE	1995-01-00
NOTE	6p.
PUB TYPE	Collected Works - Serials (022) -- Reports - Evaluative (142)
JOURNAL CIT	Community Development: Research Briefs & Case Studies; v3 n1 Jan 1995
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Child Welfare; Economic Factors; Economically Disadvantaged; Eligibility; Family Structure; *Fatherless Family; Marriage; *Poverty; Public Policy; *Rural Family; *Rural Women; *Welfare Recipients; Welfare Services
IDENTIFIERS	*Single Parents; *Welfare Reform

ABSTRACT

Many proposals for welfare reform center on the issue of marriage-based families versus single-parent families and oversimplify the relationship between single-parenting and poverty. Research done in upstate rural New York among low-income families showed that personal and economic characteristics of married and single mothers were similar as to age range, average age at birth of first child, and number of children. Single-parent families fall into four groups, suggesting that different strategies would be needed to reduce their reliance on public assistance: young and never married, young and separated or divorced, older and never married, and older and separated or divorced. The study concludes that the "single-parent family" as a category of analysis has the following policy-relevant shortcomings: misleading contrast between households with unmarried mothers and those with married mothers, implied uniformity of families within each category, and lack of temporal and qualitative dimensions. Policy recommendations include reducing birth rates among single women, evaluating employability of prospective husbands, full and regular payment of child support, assessment of violent or abusive marital status, and evaluating use of extended families. Keeping rural single mothers and their children out of poverty requires strengthening the economy so that adequate jobs are available for women and for men, reducing the gender-based earnings gap, and providing more opportunities for advancement above starting wage levels. A pro-marriage policy is no substitute for an anti-poverty policy. (Author/SAS)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED 425 039

Community Development
Research Briefs & Case Studies
Cornell Community and Rural Development Institute
Reports
Vol. 3, No. 1, January 1995

"The Single-Parent Family" and Welfare Reform: Is Marriage the Solution ?

Janet M. Fitchen

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

Sarah Sacco

RC 021738

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Community Development
Research Briefs & Case Studies
Cornell Community and Rural Development Institute
Reports
Vol. 3, No. 1, January 1995

"The Single-Parent Family" and Welfare Reform: Is Marriage the Solution ?

Janet M. Fitchen

Executive Summary

One focus of many welfare reform proposals is "the single-parent family." However, field research among rural poor families in upstate New York suggests that marriage-based welfare reform rests on several incorrect assumptions about single parent families. In-depth household histories revealed that single mothers living in poverty are actually quite varied, but they can be grouped into four distinct sub-categories based on age and marital history. For each group, different strategies are needed to promote family self-sufficiency, but in no group would marriage be an appropriate solution for household poverty. This research demonstrates the need to understand the realities of poor families before redesigning welfare.

Poverty and Single-Parent Families

Over one-fifth of the nation's children are living in poverty, but recent public and political dialogue has focused less on the poverty than on the cost of providing welfare for those children. The Clinton administration vowed to "end welfare as we know it," and the debate over how to reform the welfare system has heated up since the 1994 elections. Many proposals center on the issue of single-parenthood. Marriage-based welfare reform is attractive because of its common sense appeal: two earners are better than one; two parents are better than one. But it overlooks the complexities of structure and family dynamics, and oversimplifies the relationship between single-parenting and poverty.

> Marriage-based welfare reform oversimplifies the relationship between single-parenting and poverty.

This paper is not intended to downplay the risks for children growing up in low-income families with only one parent, nor the economic and social costs society bears for these children. Rather, my purpose is to ask policy-relevant questions concerning the core concept underlying marriage-based welfare reform: *What is "the single parent family?" Would single-parent families no longer need public assistance if their "female heads" were to marry the fathers of their children?*

Research Among Rural Low Income Families

Single parenthood is still less common among the rural poor than the urban poor, but it has become increasingly common, characterizing 39 percent of rural poor households with children in 1987. Poverty analysts have found that rural single-parent families face a triple poverty risk: they are more likely than metropolitan single parent families to be poor, to be in deep poverty, and to stay poor for a longer time.

The Study Area

Upstate New York, though neither the most isolated nor the poorest of rural areas, provides a useful research site for considering the appropriateness of various welfare-reform strategies. Between 1990 and 1992, I conducted field research among low-income families in the same upstate rural communities where I had previously explored poverty and other rural issues. This extensive field research included an exploratory examination of "single-parent families."

Methodology

I began by reviewing written records of schools, welfare departments, community action agencies, and other public and private social agencies, then, followed with interviews and focus group sessions with their staffs. These practitioners referred me to local low-income families with whom I conducted focus group sessions and 20 unstructured in-depth interviews.

On the basis of this research, I designed a detailed questionnaire on residential and household history that was utilized in interviews with 40 additional low-income mothers. Analysis of the household histories, supported and augmented by the other interviews and institutional data, raises some questions about the common conceptualization of single parenthood and the policy thrust of reducing welfare rolls through focusing on "the single-parent family."

Synopsis of Findings

No Overall Aversion to Marriage

Out of the questionnaire sample, fully one-fourth (ten women) were married and living with husbands at the time of interview. Of the 30 who weren't, 70 percent (21 women) had already been married, but their particular marriages had not worked out. Thus, over three-

RC 021738

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

fourths of the sample (31 of the 40) had at least given marriage a try.

Similarities Between Single-Parent and Two-Parent Families

Personal and economic characteristics of married and single women in the sample are surprisingly similar. The women were similarly distributed across the age range of 17 to 44; average age at birth of the first child was 19; and they had approximately the same number of children: 2.4 children per single mother as compared to 2.2 per married mother.

> Most separated/divorced women viewed extrication from a bad marriage, as a very positive change in their lives.

The ten women who were married nonetheless reported household incomes near or below the poverty line (a criterion for inclusion in the study). Significantly, in each case the woman was the primary earner in her family since the husband lacked stable or adequately paid employment. At least two of the husbands were not employed due to disabilities, a few were in part-time or seasonal work, two were low-paid farm laborers, and two were self-employed in marginal or occasional work. In these cases, the determining factor in family poverty was clearly not single parenting, but low and unsteady earning capacity of husbands.

Differences Among Single-Parent Families

A close look at the 30 cases in the sample that would usually be classified as "single-parent families" reveals significant variation, primarily on the basis of age and marital history. In age, the women ranged from 17 to 43, half of them 26 and younger, half 27 and older. In marital history, nine of the women had never been married and 21 were separated or divorced. Cross-tabulating age and marital variables sorts these households into four distinct groups, and suggests that a menu of different ameliorative strategies would be needed to reduce their reliance on public assistance.

Group I: *Young and never married (n = 5)*

Strategies: *Integrated case management to build personal maturity, effective parenting and workplace preparation.*

These women became mothers between age 17 and 21, are currently between 17 and 23, and have not yet married. Individual and group interviews revealed that a paramount interest in their lives is their relationship with men; but accompanying life-history materials suggest that the relationships they form tend to be unsatisfactory, unstable, and short-lived.

Policy initiatives to entice these women into marrying their current boyfriends as a requirement for maintaining welfare benefits or obtaining benefits for their next child would be unwise. Rather than encouraging dependence on a man as a route off of welfare, an integrated case management approach is needed that will focus on building personal maturity, effective parenting, and workplace preparation to reduce the risk of long-term welfare dependency.

Group II: *Young and separated or divorced (n = 10)*

Strategies: *Personal and parenting development, child support from fathers, education and employment training.*

The women of this group married young, either before or soon after having their first child, and are still in their early- and mid-20s (21 to 26). Several now have, and others are seeking, a replacement partner, though not necessarily a husband. Three of these 10 women have children by other men than their former husbands, in addition to one or more children from the marriage. As one might expect, these women voice skepticism about the benefits marriage would bring for themselves and their children. Several appear to lack self-esteem and a sense of direction, and may not yet be ready to sustain lasting relationships with partners.

> Different strategies are needed to address variety among single parent families.

Appropriate intervention strategies for these women, as for those of Group I, might include personal and parenting development combined with greater child support from the children's father(s). Education and employment training can be quite effective for these women although they will continue to need partial welfare assistance until they can obtain an adequate income on their own.

Group III: *Older and never married (n = 4)*

Strategies: *Training for employment which utilized nurturing tendencies.*

These women, ages 27 to 35, represent an interesting and quite distinct situation. They have lived with a series of men, and have had sufficiently difficult partner experiences, or have observed such negative marriage experiences among friends and relatives, that they now never to get married. They may still be attracted and attractive to men and may bear the children of a series of partners. They tend to see their main role in life as mother; and they appear to be warm, competent mothers, extending this role to the children of relatives or neighbors, or to foster children.

For these women, training and certification for employment that utilizes their nurturing tendencies, such as home day-care, para-professional classroom assistant, or care of the sick or elderly, would be more appropriate than marriage incentives.

Group IV: *Older and separated or divorced (n = 11)*

Strategies: *Assistance to minimize duration of poverty, such as New York's Child Assistance Program*

The women in this group, like those in Group II, had been married, but they became single later in life and are currently between 29 and 43. A few had only become poor after separation or divorce. Most view their extrication from a bad marriage, usually after several attempts, as a very positive change in their lives, stating emphatically that leaving the marriage was the best thing that ever happened to them and their children, even if it threw them into or deeper into poverty, because it freed them from a husband who had been violent, alcoholic, or unable to keep a job.

Over half of these women subsequently went back to school, earned a GED or an associate degree from a community college, or took job training to upgrade their employment options. Their long-term prospects, with or without eventual marriage, appear strong, and would be enhanced by timely and adequate assistance to minimize the duration of

their poverty and to cushion its effects on their children.

An innovative New York "alternative to welfare" program being piloted in selected counties may be particularly appropriate for this group of women. In the Child Assistance Program, the mother can retain a larger share of her paycheck from employment while still receiving assistance; food stamp benefits are cashed out, paperwork and casework are streamlined, and the client has greater opportunity to make her own decisions as well as to take responsibility for their consequences.

From Flawed "Explanation" to Illusory "Cure"

Misdiagnosed problems and conceptual muddles may lead to inappropriate or ineffective policy responses. Though the sample described here is a small one, the in-depth nature of field research — combined with my extensive study of rural families and the weight of other studies — suggests that we should question the wisdom of marriage-based welfare reform.

If single-parenthood is not a monolithic, undifferentiated phenomenon, and single-parent families are actually quite diverse, it is doubtful that marriage would be appropriate for all or effective in moving all families off welfare.

Policy Recommendations

Reducing Birthrates Among Single Women

As many analysts have suggested, welfare policy should focus less on increasing the marriage rate of single mothers and more on reducing the birth rate among women who have not yet married, especially adolescents. However, popular proposals to deny public assistance for children born to non-married mothers on welfare and to mothers under age 18 would be more punitive than preventive in their effect. Reducing pregnancies among unmarried teens requires a long-range effort that would be comprehensive, intensive, and expensive — but in the long run far more effective.

Marriage May Not End Poverty

Before enticing women on AFDC to marry the fathers of their children, it is essential to know whether the men they might marry would actually bring about an economically uplifting effect. As several poverty scholars have pointed out, the critical questions are: Who are the men in the marriage pool, and what are their economic prospects? A look at the 30 "single" mothers in this sample indicates that marriage to the current men in their lives would not likely lead them off welfare or out of poverty. This doubt is confirmed by looking at the economic situation of the 10 married women in the sample, each of whom was serving as her family's primary earner. For a woman receiving AFDC to marry an inadequate earner may bring rather minimal economic improvement to the household. The policy implication of this is that low and unsteady earning capacity of men must also be addressed — before urging more marriages.

> Weak employment opportunities may contribute more than "weak family values" to rising welfare rolls.

Child Support Requires Jobs for Men

Full and regular payment of child support would lift many children off of welfare and above the poverty line — even if not a single marriage took place. However, despite court orders and national legislation, child support will be forthcoming only if the father has an adequate income; and so again, it is essential to raise the ability of men to obtain and keep good jobs.

Marriage Can Create Problems

Household income should not be the only criterion for assessing children's well-being. Even in cases where marriage to the child's father would lift a woman off welfare, it would not improve the child's well-being if the relationship includes abuse and violence. Reducing welfare rolls by urging women to marry absent

Conceptual Issues: Critique of "The Single-Parent Family" as a Category of Analysis

On the basis of these household histories and additional individual and group interviews, I suggest that the widely accepted paradigm of "the single-parent family" and the classification of families as either "two-parent" or "single-parent" has four policy-relevant shortcomings.

1. It sets up a misleading contrast between the two opposed categories. This exaggerates differences between poor households with unmarried mothers and those with married mothers.

2. It implies a uniformity among families within each category. This glosses over significant differences among "single-parent families" in terms of family situation and household structure.

3. It lacks a temporal dimension. In so doing, it fails to capture the dynamic nature of family composition and partnering relationships over time as households slide back and forth between having a single parent, two resident parents, or one parent and a non-marital partner.

4. It lacks a qualitative dimension. As a result, both the weakness of many two-parent homes and the stability and strength of some non-marital partner relationships are obscured, and the quality of relationships children have with a mother's non-marital live-in partner is ignored.

These conceptual problems have real-life consequences. Program eligibility is often limited to single parents, but human service workers may have difficulty deciding if an applicant is "single," as, for example, in the common cases of women on AFDC who are still legally married but no longer living with their husbands, or women living with a long-term non-marital partner.

Many women themselves disagree with the way they are classified, stating that they are not technically "single" because they are still legally married even though not living with a husband; or conversely that they are single only in the technical sense that they lack a marriage licence to transform a long-term non-marital partner into a husband. Many families do not fit the overly simplistic classification system, and the categories fail to reflect real-life complexities.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

fathers of their children could be inappropriate or harmful.

Extended Families Are An Overlooked Resource

Policy emphasis on the number of resident parents derives from a nuclear family model, and totally overlooks the extended family from which many single woman derive housing, financial and social support, and child care. It also denies ethnic diversity in family patterns. Rather than ignoring the extended family, welfare reform should encourage and strengthen the support single mothers and their children may be able to derive from extended family networks.

> Keeping single mothers and their children out of poverty requires strengthening the economy so that adequate jobs are available for women and for men, reducing the gender-based earnings gap, and providing more opportunities for advancement above starting wage levels.

Looking Beyond Marriage

Focusing on marriage as a way to reduce welfare rolls perpetuates a model of individual or family deficit, and entirely misses systemic economic, racial-ethnic, and locational factors that contribute to the growing need for public assistance. Especially in rural areas, weak employment opportunities may contribute more than "weak family values" to rising welfare rolls.

> A pro-marriage policy, is no substitute for an anti-poverty policy.

Addressing Rural Needs

Because of weak economies, single-parent families living in rural areas are even more likely to be poor than comparable urban (metropolitan) families. The relevant question, then, is: What can be done in rural economies to level the playing field so that rural single mothers are no more jeopardized than their urban counterparts? To lift rural women and their children from poverty, a more promising strategy than marriage incentives already exists in the many local comprehensive employment training programs and in new, broad-based educational opportunities for women on welfare. Ultimately, though, keeping single mothers and their children out of poverty requires strengthening the economy so that adequate jobs are available for women and for men, reducing the gender-based earnings gap, and providing more opportunities for advancement above starting wage levels.

Most scholars, policy-makers, and practitioners agree that some form of public assistance will continue to be necessary, and that the present system needs change; but beyond that, there is little consensus. On all sides, however, it must be recognized that a pro-marriage policy, or any other welfare reform, is no substitute for an anti-poverty policy.

References

Fitchen, Janet M. 1991. *Endangered Spaces, Enduring Places: Change, Identity, and Survival in Rural America.* Boulder, CO: Westview Press.

Lichter, Daniel T. and David J. Eggebeen. 1991. "Children Among the Rural Poor: 1960-1990." Paper presented at the annual meetings of the Rural Sociological Society, Columbus, OH, August 1991.

Lichter, Daniel T., Felicia B. LeClere, and Diane K. McLaughlin. 1991. "Local Marriage Markets and the Marital Behavior of Black and White Women." *American Journal of Sociology* 96:843-867.

Ross, Peggy J. and Elizabeth S. Morrissey. 1989. "Rural People in Poverty: Persistent Versus Temporary Poverty." In Proceedings of National Rural Studies Committee, pp. 59-73. Corvallis, OR: Western Rural Development.

Acknowledgements

The research reported here was supported by the Ford Foundation through the Aspen Institute's Rural Economic Policy Program.

About the Author

Janet M. Fitchen is Associate Professor and Chair of the Department of Anthropology at Ithaca College in Ithaca, NY. She is author of *Endangered Spaces, Enduring Places: Change, Identity, and Survival in Rural America*, 1991, and of *Poverty in Rural America: A Case Study*, part of the Westview special studies in contemporary social issues, 1981.

Cornell University
48 Warren Hall
Ithaca, NY 14853-7801
(607) 255-9510

CaRDI is a University wide program of the NYS College of Agriculture and Life Sciences, NYS College of Human Ecology and Cornell Cooperative Extension

printed on recycled paper

CaRDI provides equal program and employment opportunities